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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 002259

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FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/30/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [TN](#)
SUBJECT: ANTI-U.S. INCITEMENT: ONE TUNISIAN IMAM
REPORTEDLY CROSSES THE LINE

Classified By: CDA David Ballard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C/NF) The imam of the main mosque in the town of Oued Ellil allegedly included severe anti-U.S. rhetoric in the course of August 18 Friday prayers. The imam is reported to have condemned the U.S. for its role in the recent fighting in Lebanon and called on Allah to "eliminate" President Bush and the Administration. Worshippers are said to have noted the presence of two high-level local RCD (ruling party) officials sitting in close proximity to the imam, in addition to the attendance of two plain clothes policemen known as such in the community.

¶2. (C/NF) This second-hand report comes from long-time Embassy contact and human rights activist, Khemais Chammari (protect), who is also ardently anti-regime. Being secular himself, Chammari was not in attendance at these Friday prayers; he told Pol/EconCouns he learned of the incident from an apolitical friend of his who was present. When asked about the credibility of his source, Chammari was emphatic about his bona fides, noting that he would have no reason to fabricate or exaggerate his description of the incident.

¶3. (C/NF) Comment: If this story is true, this would represent the first such anti-U.S. incitement we have heard of coming out of any of Tunisia's mosques, all of which are under the strict control of the state. The imam's reported words go beyond the tenor of the widespread anti-U.S. sentiment we have observed in recent weeks, which has ranged from disappointment, which tends to be voiced by long-time Embassy contacts; to criticism and conspiracy theory-fueled cynicism, particularly evidenced in the local media. The closest Tunisians have come to public incitement, as far as we are aware, was in the "Death to Israel; Death to America" banners and slogans that were in evidence at a July 17 demonstration that was broken up by the police. It may be that the GOT was simply experimenting with an approach that would allow the public to "blow off steam" about the situation in Lebanon, an issue that is not considered a threat to the stability of the government. Even so, the GOT's implicit endorsement of the imam's message, as indicated by the presence of the RCD officials and undercover police, is worrisome. Post will continue to be watchful for, and report on, such incidents. End Comment.

BALLARD